

**Memory, Time, and  
Recognition:  
Greg Hannan and  
Sabina Ott**

**gallery  
one**



**Memory, Time, and Recognition:  
Greg Hannan and Sabina Ott  
May 19 - August 5, 1990**

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The Corcoran Gallery of Art  
17th Street & New York Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20006

**Related Event**

**Painting in the Age of Media Appropriation**  
Thursday, May 17, 6:30 p.m.  
Frances and Armand Hammer Auditorium  
Free Admission

A panel discussion focusing on new directions in American painting with participants Greg Hannan, Sabina Ott, Michelle Stuart, and William Willis, moderated by Terrie Sultan, Curator of Contemporary Art. The event includes a question-and-answer session involving the panel and the audience. This program was made possible by the FUNd.



# gallery One

Greg Hannan and Sabina Ott use images as ameliorative structures, as a means toward understanding the world by detaching experience from daily existence. Combining representation and abstraction, their art creates metaphors which instigate a set of desired but not strictly predetermined responses from the viewer. Hannan and Ott encode symbols within hierarchical figurative motifs: metaphor is inherent in the suggestive fields and images in the found plywood that catalyze Hannan's painting, while Ott imbues her paintings with more historically oriented metaphors through an elaborate process of myth-making. Enumerating complex approaches to materials and process, both artists explore how images provoke involuntary memories. The disparate body of imagery each has developed shares a preoccupation with literary and symbolic references as points of entry into collective consciousness; whether investigating a formalized romanticism or a personal poetic, their symbols inform us in ways that are both subtly abstract and distinctly iconic. Each definition a viewer is capable of attaching to their work reinforces recognition, because in each artist's work we confront our own actuality through an assembled abundance of multivalent symbols.

. . . .

Greg Hannan coaxes the content inherent in his found materials through the subtle manipulation of poetic juxtapositions. Underpinning the intuitive nature of his approach is the use of elements culled from his environment as fulcrums to reveal emotional content. Hannan canvasses urban areas for wood which provide the fields upon which he draws, and for objects which crystallize



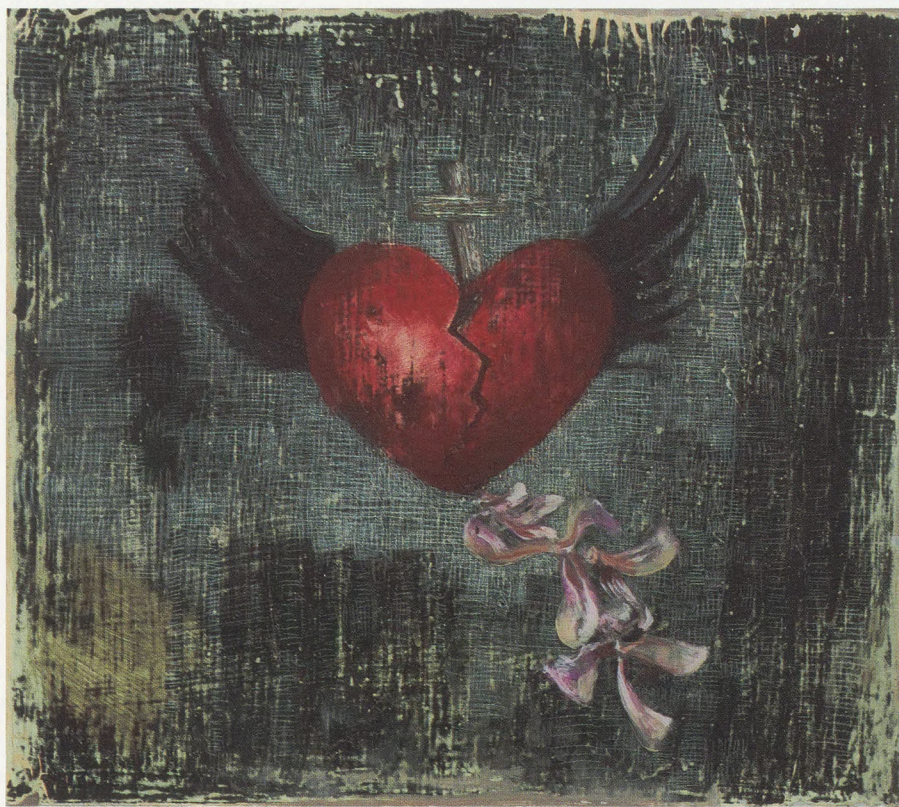
developing ideas. "Drawing in my work comes from my need to modify what I have intrinsically felt in the found materials. In other words, something has shocked me into picking up a piece of wood. Sometimes I pick up an object because it is a reinforcement of something I have already thought, and sometimes I pick up an object because I see that it is invested with certain kinds of things that I might be able to draw out."<sup>1</sup> Staining such homely detritus with a flat palette of acrylic paint, he self-consciously avoids creating luscious surfaces or precious objects, preferring instead irregular edges and a surprising array of surfaces.

Hannan maintains a continually expanding glossary of images that mirror the variety of his lived experience, reflecting also a preoccupation with literary allusion which he traces to his roots in poetry. *Devil's Purse*, 1988, is typical of the way the artist develops this glossary. A straightforward monochromatic description, or portrait, of a skate or stingray egg sack, *Devil's Purse* describes something most commonly found on the beach. Hannan adopted this failed incubator of birth for its wealth of private associations; it is an object, in his words, "special in its tenacity and delicacy." To represent it, he inscribed its likeness on a weathered field of painted plywood, subtly manipulating the atmosphere inherent in this found material with tinted washes. Simultaneously an abstract icon and a descriptive rendering, *Devil's Purse* suggests hidden secrets partially revealed. Balancing delicately between the directness of narrative realism and complete abstraction, it is indicative of how Hannan examines life by constructing his own highly idiosyncratic painterly vocabulary.

The iconography in *Becky's Dracula*, 1988, came to Hannan essentially complete, as one element of a child's drawing. Extrapolated from the child's rendition of a flying heart with a kite's tail (described by Becky as "Dracula"), a blood red heart with black wings is cracked in the center, surmounted by a cross which emerges from between the two humps of the broken heart; a floating violet bow trails behind. Hannan's rendition of what began as a child's apparition is fraught with religious, romantic, and erotic allusions; at heart *Becky's Dracula* is, like most of his art, a lament that illustrates the paradigm of an imperfect world which must be lived in despite the fact that it cannot be made whole. That such an intimate statement, based on inherently autobiographical sources, is subsumed within a wealth of cultural and literary allusions strongly suggests the artist's need for art that is ameliorative, or which at least possesses some healing or helping potential. Paradoxically, much of the dilemma in his work is based on the conflict between his urban existence and his deep attachment to nature--in this sense, his art, with its rehabilitation of urban or rural detritus, seeks to give voice (and through this voice validity) to what could otherwise too easily become mute animal subsistence.

In *Threnody*, 1987, a turquoise column stands adorned with a violet bow. Angled to the right, this structure is juxtaposed with a tilted scaffold of found wood and metal; the letters *W, O, R* emerge on the right, vestiges of the previous life of Hannan's plywood surface. The theatrical sense of place that is one of the main characteristics of *Threnody* is achieved through his first realizing and then heightening the color and drawing already inherent in the surfaces.





*Becky's Dracula*, 1988

However, while *Threnody* evokes an emotional state rather than a distinct narrative, seemingly inchoate combination of elements are again firmly grounded in personal experience, recalling a moment when the artist saw a similar bow (a bow also strikingly similar to the bow in *Becky's Dracula*) tied across a chain-link fence in front of a home in a Cuban neighborhood in Key West as a symbol of a death in the family. Color and image coincide to reinforce *Threnody's* strong metaphorical significance as a dirge or a traditional song of lamentation for the dead. According to Hannan, "Violet represents the absolute." With roots in Catholicism, he associates color--the green of faith, the violet of death--with religious vestments. However, his love of nature also insists on a reference to the daily passage of time documented by the fugitive chromatic of the sky at last light.

Political activism and social consciousness also inform Hannan's iconography. *Irish Flag*, 1987, is comprised of three pieces of found wood which are over-painted in the colors of the Irish flag. The imagery is a disquieting hybrid, an admixture of humanoid and mechanistic forms: a bridge spans the top of the





*Threnody*, 1987

three panels, while a subtle illusion to barbed wire stretches across the bottom, metaphorically bracketing row upon row of white crosses in a cemetery. The outer panels are inscribed with surreal figures set in the remnants of an industrial landscape. In the center white section the letters

L  
A U  
N  
D R  
Y

appear. Graphically pointing out the impossibility of washing away the abundant blood and dirty political activities that have mutilated a country in conflict, *Irish Flag* is a *memento mori*, a melancholic litany of the continuing violence and death in Northern Ireland.



Sabina Ott approaches the process of image-making as a means of understanding intellectual and psychological complexity; her painterly meditations are both emotional and logical. Encoding psychological states within a variety of mythological and art historical contexts, she creates lavish, painterly surfaces to investigate the ultimately nostalgic nature of representation and memory through a meditation on the notion of the object and its double. Using mirror images, oval shapes, profiles, or garlanded wreaths to establish figure/ground relationships, Ott's art implies that an image is at best a reflection of surface reality. "I have always chosen images and paint applications that I deem culturally familiar within the genre of landscape, still life and portraiture. I want people to question, 'why are these images juxtaposed in this way?' My work is very literally about reading the image."<sup>2</sup> From this statement, one might be seduced into considering Ott's view as a distanced one, with roots in cognition rather than emotion. But while the images in her paintings can be easily and immediately comprehended, any understanding of the artist's work comes only from first embracing the larger dimensions of her romantic world view, placing the very personal nature of her imagery within the larger context of the highly public forum of painterly tradition.

Ott has employed a panoply of means of expressing mastery over the medium of paint, from the expressionist brushstrokes of her work from the early 1980s, to the concise gestures of her current encaustic work. Incorporating photocopy replications, or suddenly revealing the wood grain of her support in the midst of a painterly passage, she intentionally disrupts our expectations for continuity, to, in her words, "bring you up short." Reinforcing the physicality of her image, she nevertheless insists on the role of representation in recreating a remembered event or thing, always juxtaposing the corporeality of painted reality against the insubstantiality of the representation it implies or suggests. Ott has stated that she "wants the work to be about that process of looking for the reflection, looking for self-reflection, and then being stopped by the reality of the object and the realization that the painting can hint at the process of searching for the self, but cannot actually reflect the self."

Like Greg Hannan, Ott has developed a glossary of images with roots in literary and psychological references. Working with titles such as *Narcissus*, *Echo*, and *Disappearance and Return*, she reiterates icons serially, rephrasing her ideas from canvas to canvas. *Disappearance and Return* makes multiple references not only to Greek myth, (tying together Narcissus's indulgence with his own reflection, and the ultimate non-corporeality of Echo's existence) but also quite specifically to Freudian explanations for the painful process of childhood separation. In these three series, the idea of a mirror often evokes a shadowy world of reflection, but while a mirror can reflect, distort, compress, lie, or reveal, it always creates a deliberate confrontation with the viewer, and Ott consciously reinforces these notions within the context of art-making. Turning the mirror metaphorically on the viewer, she poses to us the same temptation faced by Narcissus--the desire to remake reality to suit our own appearance. If Narcissus's failure was his seduction by, and exclusive involvement with, the surface resemblance of a material present tense at the expense of any future potential, Ott's mirror-like spaces tempt us with a similar dilemma--losing our identities in the sensory self-gratification of an examination of her lusciously garlanded hollowed-out spaces, we can easily distract ourselves from her references to the mutable world of self-awareness.





*Table of Contents: Partnership*, 1988

Ott splits the picture plane in *Table of Contents: Partnership*, 1988, structuring the landscape allusions inherent in her diptych within the abstractness of an oval format. Precisely rendered, the objects in the top half, signifiers of chemistry or alchemy, are positioned within a ghostly atmospheric space. The mirror-image reflection that haunts the lower half, however, is a flattened schematic outline—both bowl and beakers are reduced to silhouetted shadows in a dimensionless field. For Ott, the stereoscopic point of view of the *Table of Contents: Partnership* reinforces the pervasiveness of the concept of an image and its double. Metaphorically representing the quite distinct virtues of actuality and artifice, her representation also suggests a viewpoint of paired opposites which, like memory and representation, are fundamentally intertwined but exist as separate realities.





*Disappearance and Return: #8, 1990*

*Disappearance and Return: #9, 1990*, reiterates the four-square composition of *Portrait: Echo #5*. In this work, however, all images, except the final black wreath of ivy in the lower right panel, are obscured, either by the scraping away of layers of encaustic, or by overlays of poured paint. Partially veiled, the cumulative effect of *Disappearance and Return: #9* is a visual expression of brief flashes of recognizable memories altered by time, place, or circumstance. In this work Ott makes a significant addition to her palette: brilliant red is introduced, both to describe and to obfuscate.

Roses are the traditional symbol for the union of spiritual and physical love, and they are the most recent addition to Ott's vocabulary of images. In *Disappearance and Return: #8, 1990*, she subverts our symbolic attachment to the beauty intrinsic to the form of the rose. Inverting traditional color schemes,



black roses float on a field partially obscured by dripping red paint. In Elizabethan culture the rose served as a metaphor for loved ones, and a wealth of descriptive and poetic phrases related the flower to true love and virtuous passion, but in *Disappearance and Return: #8* Ott inserts aphoristic suggestions with definite human overtones. Merged with a subtle oval portrait outline and submerged within skeins of red paint, Ott's rose deliberately invokes the inevitable interruption implicit in any romantic attachment. Veiling a sense of loss within the poetry of a lament, she suggests that like the rose, which takes on different color and characteristics after its death, human experience possesses a form that is much more than the sum of the momentary junctures which fill daily existence.

. . .

*The act of involuntary memory, fleeting, and the act of recognition more permanently, wrench themselves free of clock time to find a perspective vast enough to hold all our experience.*<sup>3</sup>

While the 1980s has largely been viewed as an age dominated by media appropriation, thirty-second sound bites, and dispassionate formal commentary, it is still possible to regard painting as a willful human act that maintains its ability to communicate hope, despair, or faith. Suggesting that the realm of poetics and metaphor remains a valid means of expressing humanity, Greg Hannan and Sabina Ott have insisted on making their work complex arenas of double meaning that require a melding of intellect and emotion. Both have chosen to frame their work within the territories of individual experience, stretching personal boundaries to the point where they reflect more universal concerns. These two artists make manifest the best of what the activity of painting has to offer at the end of the twentieth century. Extrapolating glimpses of life and death, their compelling surfaces transform the too familiar confines of human activity into the surprising language of the visual, couching existence in terms of the conjuncture between what is seen and what is understood.

Terrie Sultan

Curator of Contemporary Art

### Footnotes

1. All quotes by Greg Hannan are from an interview with the author on March 1, 1990.
2. All quotes by Sabina Ott are from an interview with the author on March 21, 1990.
3. Roger Shattuck, *Proust's Binoculars: A Study of Memory, Time and Recognition in A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1962 (1983). 48.



## Greg Hannan

Greg Hannan was born in Washington, D.C. He studied at George Washington University and the Corcoran School of Art, Washington, D.C. He lives and works in Washington, D.C.

### Individual exhibitions:

- 1974 Jane Haslem Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1975 Mount Saint Vincent University Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia
- 1983 The Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C.
- 1986 "Narrative Paper," Osuna Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1988 Addison/Ripley Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1989 Arnold & Porter, Washington, D.C.

### Group exhibitions:

- 1980 "Thirty-Six Hours," The Museum of Temporary Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1981 "Options: Washington, 1981," The Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C.
- 1982 "Hanover," Osuna Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- "Four Imagists," Montpelier Art Center, Laurel, Maryland
- 1983 "Osuna at Schuster," Ganno University, Erie, Pennsylvania
- 1984 "A Celebration of the South," Columbia, South Carolina
- 1985 "The Washington Show," The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1986 "Painting '86," Arlington Arts Center, Arlington, Virginia
- 1987 "Ten Washington Artists," Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina
- "Works on Paper," Jane Haslem Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1988 "Artscape '88," Maryland Institute, College of Art, Baltimore, Maryland
- 1989 "Washington Artists: Those Who Left/Those Who Stayed," Franz Bader Gallery, Washington, D.C.

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- Alice Thorson, "Hannan and Cernuda evince enlarged visions," *The Washington Times*, September 22, 1988.



## Sabina Ott

Sabina Ott was born in New York City. She received degrees from the San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, California (BA and MFA). She lives and works in Los Angeles, California.

### Individual exhibitions:

- 1982 A.R.E. Gallery, San Francisco, California
- 1983 Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA), Los Angeles, California
- 1985 Attack Gallery, Los Angeles, California  
Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, New York  
Davies/Long Gallery, Los Angeles, California
- 1986 Davies/Long Gallery, Los Angeles, California  
Acme Art, San Francisco, California
- 1987 Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, New York  
Galerie am Moritzplatz, Berlin, West Germany  
Betsy Rosenfield Gallery, Chicago, Illinois  
Pence Gallery, Santa Monica, California
- 1988 Pence Gallery, Santa Monica, California  
Art Institute of Southern California,  
Laguna Beach, California
- 1989 Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, California  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,  
San Francisco, California  
Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, New York

### Group exhibitions:

- 1981 Heller Gallery, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, California  
"San Francisco Art Institute Alumni Invitational,"  
Richmond Arts Center, Richmond, California
- 1983 "Figures in L.A.," Swope Gallery, Los Angeles, California
- 1984 "Under Surveillance," Attack Gallery, Los Angeles, California  
"The Cotton Exchange Show," Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Los Angeles, California
- 1985 "Astonishing Horizons," Los Angeles Visual Arts (LAVA)/ Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles, California  
"Artists from Attack Gallery,"  
Piezo Electric Gallery, New York, New York  
"Downtown Artist's Show," Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Los Angeles, California
- 1986 "The Third Western States Exhibition,"  
The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York  
"A Southern California Collection,"  
Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles, California
- 1987 "New Works," Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, New York  
"Avant-Garde in the Eighties," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California  
"10 Jahre Kunst," Galerie am Moitzplatz, Berlin, West Germany  
"On the Horizon: Emerging in California,"  
Fresno Arts Center and Museum, Fresno, California  
"Contemporary Diptychs: Divided Visions,"  
Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center, New York, New York  
"Landscape '87," Mathes Cultural Center, Escondido, California  
"Year 1: A Survey," Pence Gallery, Santa Monica, California
- 1988 "The Flower Show," Betsy Rosenfield Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
- 1989 "Words and Images: Seven Corporate Commissions," Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, Ohio  
"Victoria," Pence Gallery, Santa Monica, California
- 1990 "Brazil Projects - 90," Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles, California



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- Zan Dubin, "Awardees: One Paints, The Other Doesn't," *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1986.
- Roni Feinstein, *Contemporary Diptychs: Divided Visions*, (exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center, New York, 1987).
- David Stevens French, "An Eclectic Selection," *Artweek*, May 11, 1985. 5.
- , "Reading the Images," *Artweek*, June 1, 1985. 6.
- Colin Garder, "Attack/Los Angeles," *Arts Magazine*, February/ March 1985. 13.
- , "Sabina Ott at Davies/Long," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1986. Section IV; 14.
- Deborah Gimelson, "Talk of the Trade: Art Against AIDS," *Art & Auction*, December 1988. 54.
- Lawrence Gipe, "Free Association," *Artweek*, May 3, 1986. 7.
- Grace Glueck, "Sabina Ott," *The New York Times*, September 13, 1985.
- Ellen Handy, "Ron Nagle/Sabina Ott at Charles Cowles Gallery," *Arts Magazine*, November 1985. 139.
- Michael Kurcfeld, "Twentieth Century Fox," *LA Weekly*, November 21-27, 1985.
- Maude Lynn, "Pigments of Her Imagination," *LA Weekly*, October 4-10, 1985.
- Mac McCloud, "History Skillfully Manipulated," *Artweek*, June 11, 1988. 5.
- Suzanne Muchnic, "Sabina Ott at Pence Gallery," *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1988. Section VI; 17.
- David Pagel, "Sabina Ott," *Santa Monica News*, May 20, 1988. 12.
- Lane Relyea, "Sabina Ott/Pick of the Week," *LA Weekly*, May 24-30, 1985.
- Buzz Spector, "Sabina Ott at Pence Gallery," *Artforum*, October 1988. 156.
- Ray Zone, "Sabina Ott," *Artscene*, April 1986.



## Checklist:

### Greg Hanman

*Irish Flag*, 1986-87

acrylic and metal on wood

98 x 72 inches

Courtesy Addison/Ripley Gallery,  
Washington, D.C.

*Threnody*, 1987

acrylic on wood

82 x 45 inches

Courtesy Addison/Ripley Gallery,  
Washington, D.C.

*Becky's Dracula*, 1988

acrylic on wood

19 1/2 x 21 3/4 inches

Collection Mary Swift, Washington, D.C.

*Devil's Purse*, 1988

acrylic on wood

23 1/2 x 36 inches

Courtesy Addison/Ripley Gallery,  
Washington, D.C.

*Requiem: Whipple Pt.*, 1988

acrylic on wood

21 1/2 x 36 inches

Courtesy Addison/Ripley Gallery,  
Washington, D.C.

*Disengage*, 1989

fixed graphite on wood

42 1/2 x 95 1/2 inches

Courtesy Addison/Ripley Gallery,  
Washington, D.C.

*Dream Panel/Junction*, 1989

acrylic on wood

64 x 94 inches

Courtesy Addison/Ripley Gallery,  
Washington, D.C.

*Russian Garden*, 1990

mixed media on wood

67 x 83 inches

Courtesy Addison/Ripley Gallery,  
Washington, D.C.

### Sabina Ott

*Table of Contents: Partnership*, 1988

oil and encaustic on canvas over panel

72 x 60 inches

Collection Progressive Corporation, Cleveland, Ohio

*Disappearance and Return: #2*, 1989

oil, encaustic, photostat paper on mahogany panel

48 x 36 inches

Collection Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A.,  
New York, New York

*Portrait (Echo #4)*, 1989

oil and encaustic on mahogany panel

66 x 48 inches

Courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery,  
New York, New York

*Portrait (Echo #5)*, 1989

oil and encaustic on four (4) mahogany panels

54 x 44 inches, overall

Collection Mr. & Mrs. Gunderson, Jr., Atherton, California;  
Courtesy Pence Gallery, Santa Monica, California

*Portrait (Narcissus)*, 1989

oil and encaustic on canvas

96 x 60 inches

Collection Harvey Schulweis;  
Courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery,  
New York, New York

*Portrait (Narcissus II)*, 1989

oil and encaustic on canvas

96 x 60 inches

Collection of the artist;  
Courtesy Pence Gallery, Santa Monica, California

*Disappearance and Return: #8*, 1990

oil, encaustic, photostat paper on mahogany panel

48 x 36 inches

Collection Mr. & Mrs. Harry W. Anderson,  
Atherton, California;  
Courtesy Pence Gallery, Santa Monica, California

*Disappearance and Return: #9*, 1990

oil, encaustic, photostat paper on

four (4) mahogany panels

54 x 44 inches, overall

Collection Mr. & Mrs. Robert J. Novick,  
Malibu, California;  
Courtesy Pence Gallery, Santa Monica, California

*Disappearance and Return: #10*, 1990

oil, encaustic, photostat paper on mahogany panel

25 x 20 inches

Collection Charles Cowles, New York, New York



**Photo credits:**

Brian Forrest: *Table of Contents: Partnership*, 1988;  
*Portrait (Narcissus II)*, 1989; *Disappearance and  
Return: #9*, 1990; *Disappearance and Return: #8*, 1990.

Paul Kennedy: *Threnody*, 1987; *Irish Flag*, 1986-87;  
*Russian Garden*, 1990.

Greg Staley: *Becky's Dracula*, 1988



